DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 698 CS 212 557

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TITLE Using Personal Journals in the Classroom.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (52nd, Seattle, WA, November 9-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; Higher Education; *Journal Writing; Self Expression; *Social Sciences; *Student Journals; *Teacher Student Relationship; Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Teachers in the social sciences have found that journals can be useful tools in their classes. Depending on the needs and preferences of the teacher, a variety of formats can be used: highly structured journals based on regular teacher-directed classroom and homework assignments or completely free-form diary-like personal types. No matter what the format, a journal is ideally a non-threatening place where a student can be free to explore and analyze critically a broad range of ideas and feelings, attitudes and opinions about the subject of the course. Benefits to the teacher include a very personal but nonthreatening interaction between teacher and student, opportunities for dialogue with each student, and greater knowledge and understanding of the students. When teachers use journals in the classroom they tend to like the results; however, most acknowledge that journals can demand more time and commitment from the teacher than the usual term papers and do not recommend them for large classes. Problems also arise over how to grade journals, issues of confidentiality and trust between teacher and student, and the temptation of the teacher to act as therapist. Students' reactions to journals tend to be very enthusiastic, and although they sometimes object to the greater commitment and larger amount of writing that is required of them, the majority like the unusual approach to learning and the new insights that they gain into themselves, their family and friends. (Twenty references are attached.) (Author/MG)

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USING PERSONAL JOURNALS IN THE CLASSROOM

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A paper prepared for presentation at the 52nd Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations, November 9-14, 1990 in Seattle, Washington.

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Abstract

The use of personal journals to teach writing skills and encourage creativity is popular in undergraduate English courses. Recently, teachers in the social sciences have found that journals can be useful tools in their classes as well. Depending on the needs and preferences of the teacher, a variety of formats can be used: highly structured journals based on regular teacher-directed classroom and homework assignments, or completely free-form diary-like personal entries, or a combination of directed and non-directed entry types. No matter what the format, a journal is ideally a non-threatening place where a student can be free to explore and critically analyze a broad range of ideas and feelings, attitudes and opinions about the subject of the course. For the student of families, the journal can help in analyzing one's own family experiences and in placing those experiences into the context of the larger community of social relationships. The student can grow intellectually and emotionally over the course of a term or semester, and this evolution can be charted by both student and teacher through the journal. Struggles with feelings and thoughts can occur about the course material itself; about how the material is presented; and about the memories, personal experiences and observations that are stimulated by the course work, especially if the material is family-related. Self-awareness and greater depth of sensitivity to family problems and issues are an especially positive outcome for students in family studies courses. Benefits to the teacher include a very personal but non-threatening interaction between teacher and student, opportunities for dialogue with each student, and greater knowledge and understanding of the students. When teachers use journals in the classroom, they tend to like the results. However, most acknowledge that journals can demand more time and commitment from the teacher than the usual term papers and do not recommend them for large classes. Problems also arise over how to grade journals, issues of confidentiality and trust between teacher and student, and the temptation of the teacher to act as therapist. Students' reactions to journals tend to be very enthusiastic. Most recognize and sometimes object to the greater commitment and larger amount of writing that is required of them. However, most like the unusual approach to learning and the new insights that they gain into themselves, family and friends.

Using Personal Journals in the Classroom

A few years ago several of my students reported me to the English Department on campus for requiring an unusual amount of writing assignments of them. I did not know whether to be flattered or not - I do not think my students appreciated the essays and term papers I was demanding of them. However, the English department did, and asked me if I would be interested in participating in some Writing Across the Curriculum workshops. Through one of the faculty involved in that project, I was introduced to using journal-writing as a teaching technique. I have since found out that there is nothing particularly new about doing this, but the idea was new to me.

Most of us are familiar with diaries, journals in which we regularly enter descriptive information about what is happening in our lives including feelings, beliefs, opinions, gossip, whatever we want to write for our eyes alone. When used in teaching, the journal can describe many of these same things but the information and experience of the academic course work directly control and alter what is written. Also, the journal used in teaching is not usually private; the teacher acts as an audience. This means that the journal can provide a new channel of information in the classroom, communicating and stimulating critical thinking and feeling for both teacher and student. In particular, with the guidance of a teacher, the journal can provide a wonderful opportunity to send students on a

directed exploration of ideas and feelings that they might never attempt on their own.

What I am going to do in this paper is to give you some brief background on the use of journals; why I use them; and what I think journal-writing can do for students and teachers, particularly classes on the Family. I will briefly give you some ideas on how to use a journal in teaching and discuss some of the problems and issues.

Background

Using journals for purposes other than privately recording personal history is not unusual. For example, some therapists have found that when a client keeps a journal, "the client develops a way of knowing himself or herself that can be sustained outside of and beyond the time of psychotherapy" (Hays 1988:135). In the academic world, journal writing is a popular technique in women's studies courses for helping students think through gender issues (Lowenstein 1987:94). English courses often include journal writing for a variety of reasons, but particularly to encourage creative experimentation with style and content (Fulwiler 1987:99). My own field, sociology, has a tradition, beginning with C. Wright Mills, that encourages the use of journal writing to develop one's "sociological imagination" (Mills 1957). This endorsement has resulted in the occasional adoption of personal journals in teaching

sociology (c.f., Karcher 1988; Macheski 1989; Miller and Miller 1976; Wagenaar 1984).

Most recently Writing Across the Curriculum programs promote journal-writing as one way all disciplines can include more and varied writing in their curricula. The belief, backed up to some extent by research on writing (Beach and Bridwell 1984; Coker and Scarboro 1990; Young and Fulwiler 1986) is that, in Janet Emig's words, "Writing represents a unique mode of learning -- not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique" (1983:123). Participation in journal writing and other writing activity is believed to produce not just better writers but better thinkers and learners (Fulwiler 1982).

My Own Use of Journal-Writing

My own decision to have my students keep personal journals grew out of some essays I assigned asking students to write about a personal experience of a social problem. Most essays described emotionally moving, tragic family events of violence, divorce, death, drug and alcohol abuse. From reading these essays I wondered if I could use personal journals to help my students tap into this experience as an additional resource for understanding sociology as well as themselves.

I was also aware of the problem Everett K. Wilson refers to as the "apartheid" in the college classroom: the socially structured separateness between instructor and

student, particularly the lack of shared experiences: of the past, of academia, and of the world outside college. Such differences create communication difficulties and power inequalities (Wilson 1985). The personal journal appealed to me as a way to break through this apartheid, to connect with my students on some level other than the usual meetings during office hours and during class discussions. After all, I am twenty years older than most of them, and their experience is probably very different from mine. What is college life, dating, sex, friendship, and family like for them? How are they coping with the temptations of drugs and alcohol, the scariness of Herpes and AIDS?

To a large extent journal-writing has more than met my expectations. The journals have given both my students and me insight into the world around them as seen through their eyes.

The Rewards of Journal-Writing

I see journals as contributing toward both intellectual and emotional growth for both student and teacher. One of the most useful aspects of this is that this growth can be charted by both student and teacher over the course of the school term.

For the learning of course-related information, the journal can, ideally, be a non-threatening place for discovery. The student is free to ask questions, struggle with feelings and thoughts, critically analyze course

material, ideas expressed by others in class, and his/her own opinions, values, ideas, emotions.

In a Family class, much of the material covered can touch directly on a student's life, past, present or future. Thus it is particularly easy to find experiences to write about in a journal. This material can be fruitfully analyzed for concepts or theories discussed in class. Differences and commonalities between one's own family experience and that of others can be thought through in depth. Students have told me that they have gained from this assignment a greater tolerance, sensitivity and understanding of the problems that others face.

There is a strong likelihood that at least some students using personal journals will use them to examine difficult present or past relationships and their feelings about them. The depths of such self-exploration vary between students. In the hands of a naturally self-analytic student, the journal can be therapeutic, with exploration leading to self-discovery. In other, more cautious, students personal experience is kept carefully within the bounds of the course material. I believe, however, that for most students there is some inevitable maturity over the course of the term that results from writing in a journal, particularly in their ability to place their own experience into the context of the larger world of social relationships.

For the teacher, the rewards of journal-writing are less personal, but can be great nonetheless. Above all, one gets to know individual students in a way that is not possible any other way except through a close friendship. Students can reveal very personal information which would be revealed awkwardly, if at all, in an interview.

There is also the possibility that the journal can be the basis of a written two-way communication with a student who would never come to your office. For example, I had a dialogue like this with a student who was a visual artist who had never taken anything but studio courses at an art school. His journal, written in an unconventional chaotic style, revealed some very intelligent insights into the issues we were studying. But it was also filled with his own frustration at trying to communicate coherently using the written word. He desperately wanted to be able to write like everyone else so he could get through college. I wrote advice, criticism and supportive comments in his journal and he would respond with more comments and questions. He never talked in class and never talked to me directly. In fact I never heard his voice until six months later when he came up to me in a hallway to thank me. I believe that had it not been for his journal-writing, this student might have dropped out before the semester was half over.

The teacher also gains greater knowledge and understanding of the students as a group. The "apartheid"

I described above does seem to be less of a problem. Students seem to be more willing to talk in class, to challenge and ask questions.

There are other rewards for the teacher. I particularly enjoy reading what others write about themselves and their families; I am less bored than I would be by yet another term paper on child abuse or alcoholism. The journals also have potential as a resource for qualitative data, but for me, it is enough that they give me occasional insights and ideas.

Some Decisions to Make When Using Journals

Journals for teaching are usually structured along several dimensions: 1) who decides what will go into the journal, the teacher or the student, or both; 2) and what will be in the journal, entries related only to course material or only personal material or a blend of both. What you choose will depend on your goals for the course, your personal preferences, and convenience. I have read of highly-structured journals consisting entirely of classroom and homework assignments given by the teacher, with little room for diary-like personal entries. Such assignments do not necessarily ignore personal material, but the material will be very focused and blended with course-related material. Similarly, other journals that are at the other free-form, student-directed extreme do not necessarily have to contain only personal subject matter. I have had

students complain about having to constantly come up with their own ideas for writing. They need more structure and perhaps more assigned topics. Other students complain that assignments are boring and thrive on generating their own topics. In my own teaching I combine a variety of approaches to appeal to different needs and styles of my students.

Toby Fulwiler is author of many articles on journal-writing and major proponent of cross-curriculum writing. He suggests that journal-writing assignments can be used to introduce a class; to summarize and end a class; to interrupt the boredom of a class lecture; as a vehicle for posing and solving problems; as homework; as student progress reports and to inform others in the class about one's own concerns and question raised in class (Fulwiler 1982).

More specifically, entries can concern readings, required or suggested. These can include comments (not summaries), criticisms, evaluations, questions and insights; how the material relates to rest of the course, to specific theories or concepts discussed in class; what was interesting or convincing; or what hypotheses were stimulated by the reading (McKeachie 1986:130). Entries can also be reactions to TV, events, behavior of friends, family and other people. Students can also explore theories, concepts, problems discussed in class or with others (Brodsky and Meagher 1987:376). They can evaluate

the class itself, the teacher, the other students or themselves.

In addition, there are some practical decisions to be made. Do you want carefully crafted paragraphs; or poetry, doodles and newspaper clippings? My own preference allows for a combination, leaving it up to the student's own inclination as to style but giving some boundaries on length and use of non-original material, depending on the assignment.

The journal can be graded or not graded. My own approach, based on Brodsky and Meagher (1987:377), is to grade students on whether or not they are doing the writing. I let them know at the beginning of the term that they are to produce a certain number of entries for an A, for a B, etc. I never grade content except in a general way, considering the effort, e.g., the thought, feeling and analytical skills, that they have apparently put into the journal entries.

Problematic Issues

I want to make it clear that journals are not a substitute for formal writing, essays or research papers. Journals lack the structure and focus that these other forms of writing have, and do not demand the discipline of thought, organization and style that the usual types of written papers need. They require a commitment of time

from both student and teacher that both may resent under the pressure of other obligations.

For the teacher, the major factor for deciding whether to use journals may be class size. Journals are most easily used in small classes, preferably no larger than 30 students. I have used them in a class of 45 but it was very time-consuming to read and write comments on that many journals every three weeks.

Grading journals is something of a problem: if they are graded at all, one wonders about the honesty of what the students are writing; if they are left ungraded, one wonders about the incentive to do the work. It can also be time-consuming to keep track of grades if there are many entries every week.

The major problem in assigning journals to students in Family courses concerns the issue of confidentiality and trust. Students often reveal very personal, even intimate details of their lives on paper. I have had students who described participation in parties where drugs and alcohol were used, or wrote about very private family problems and then had these journals accidentally fall into the hands of their parents or friends resulting in embarrassing, difficult situations for them. I cannot protect them from their own carelessness, but I can do my best to protect them in class. I ask students to tell me if they do not want their journals or particular entries to be read aloud but anonymously in class. I photocopy entries for reading

rather than hold the journals, since journal covers will sometimes identify their authors. I always personally hand graded journals back to students individually rather than asking another student to do this. I also never leave them in a box where other students can look at them. Establishing and being worthy of the students' trust is crucial to the use of personal journals in the classroom.

Along with trust, one needs empathy to read students' journals. However, that can also create a problem for the teacher. Students will often use a journal in much the same way a therapy client will use one, to explore personally problematic situations and feelings. The temptation is always there for the teacher to give advice, to counsel, to play therapist in the written comments. It is difficult not to want to help the student who is struggling with a drug problem, who is involved with an abusive boyfriend, who is homesick and depressed. If you are a trained therapist, you may feel comfortable giving guidance to such a student. I don't. I am not a therapist and I tell my students that repeatedly throughout the semester. The only non-academic advice I will give them is to suggest that they talk to someone who knows something about the particular problem that they have disclosed. I keep a list of people and places for these kind of referrals, also writing them on the blackboard for the entire class. It is very flattering to have a student disclose his/her personal problems but teachers also need

to be reminded of the powerful influence that they can have on such trusting students.

Popularity of Journal-Writing in the Classroom

Articles on student journals report that students tend to be enthusiastic about their use in the classroom (Baltensperger 1987; Brodsky and Meagher 1987; Fulwiler 1982; Wagenaar 1984). My own students have enjoyed journals, telling me that they appreciate particularly the opportunity to think about themselves, their families and friends in light of issues and perspectives that they have never thought about before. Their primary objection has been in the time and commitment required, which is usually a greater amount of writing throughout the semester than they have ever done before outside of an English class. I also have found that the assignment is more popular among freshmen and sophomores than juniors and seniors. The upperclass men and women are more focused in their interests and prefer to write research papers that allow them to explore one topic in depth rather than a variety of topics more superficially. One way around this problem is to direct the journal into exploration of a single topic.

Teachers also tend to like the results of using journals in teaching (Brodsky and Meagher 1987; Grumbacher 1987; Halberg 1987). Although I have not tested this empirically, it seems that discussions in classes with journals are more lively, that students feel more involved,

that attendance is higher and that the quality of their other work for the class is better because of their greater enthusiasm. Obviously, teaching is much easier and pleasurable if students are excited about the class. The amount of reading and grading created by journals, however, is discouraging to some teachers. I recommend that if you try this technique that you begin with a fairly small class.

Beyond the Traditional College Classroom

I think journal-writing has a lot of potential beyond the usual college students that I have been describing. I think the technique is particularly appropriate for non-traditional students, students who are working, have families, and are older. The rich diversity of experiences ranging through many stages of the life-course that they bring to the class can be fascinating for their own personal exploration in journals.

Foreign exchange students or students using English as a second language may find the journals daunting at first because of the heavy writing required. I had a Japanese student who struggled with her journal but her English rapidly improved, and the perspectives that she brought to the issues we discussed in class were often completely different than those of other students. Because she lacked confidence in her English, and also for cultural reasons, she never spoke in class. The journal was the place where

she could say what she might have said aloud in class, where she could practice writing her English in a non-threatening situation and where she and I could ask each other questions about American versus Japanese behavior.

We also need to think about using journal-writing outside the usual college classroom. Workshops for professionals and lay people that go for several days can incorporate journals as a means of summarizing and thinking through the barrage of information that comes in such a short time. Another approach is to incorporate journals into the workplace (Hickman 1987).

The key point to keep in mind when thinking about whether your teaching situation is appropriate for journal-writing is that the technique is very adaptable. Some variant of the basic idea of combining personal exploration through writing about the subject matter of your course will probably work in your teaching. I encourage you to try it and see.

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